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ARCHITECTURAL REMAINS OF THE PRIORY OF ST. JOHN, KILKENNY.

BY JAMES G. ROBERTSON, ESQ.

[*Read at the Meeting of January 8th.*]

The Kilkenny Archæological Society having been instituted "to preserve, examine and illustrate all ancient monuments of the history, manners, customs and arts of our ancestors, more especially as connected with the County and City of Kilkenny," I presume that, in cases where valuable monuments have been destroyed, or their ancient features obliterated, the placing on record of authentic drawings and plans illustrative of the appearance of such structures before they became thus lost or defaced, must come fully within the scope of the Society's objects. Under this impression, I beg to present a ground-plan of the priory of St. John of Kilkenny, and a drawing of its ancient lady-chapel, both made prior to the serious alterations which took place in the building some years since, consequent upon the formation of a portion of the ruins into the modern parish church of St. John.

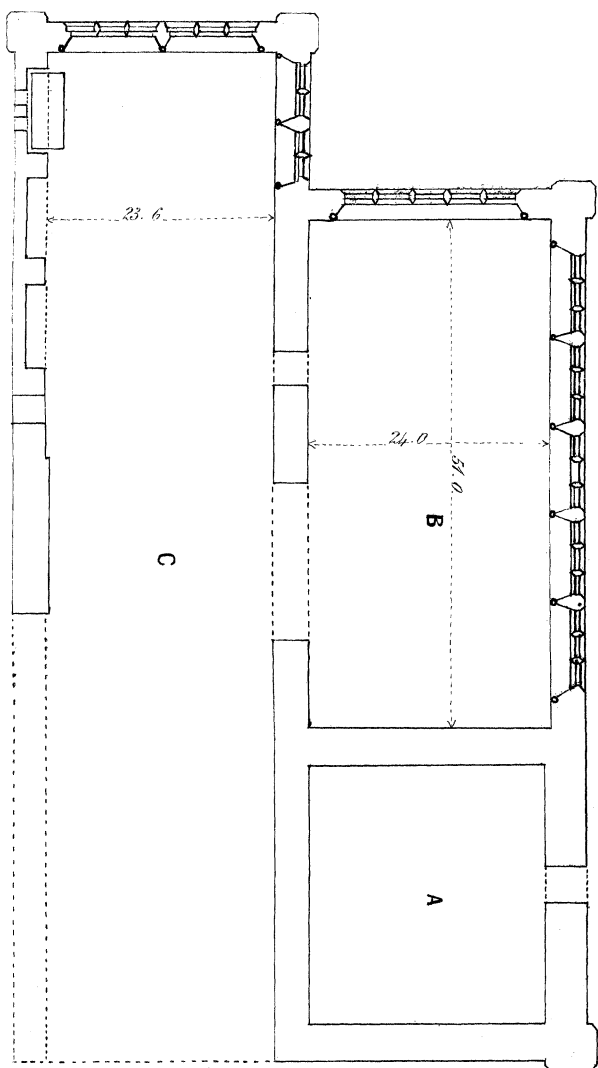
The foundation of this priory by William Marshal the elder, earl of Pembroke, is by Archdall in his "*Monasticon*," placed in the year 1211; by Grose, in his "*Antiquities*," and the translator of *Allemande* (both later than the "*Monasticon Anglicanum*"), in 1220. This was the first religious establishment in Kilkenny: Archdall states, that previous to that year (1211) no religious house appears to have existed in this City. *Allemande* says, "at Kilkenny, the capital of the County and a Bishop's See, there is a Priory and Hospital of the Augustinian order, founded by William Marshall earl of Pembroke (an English nobleman very famous in the first expedition of the English into Ireland), in the year 1211, if we may believe Ware; for the compilers of the *Monasticon Anglicanum*, who have given us the foundation charter entire in their editions, vol. ii. p. 1042, allege that this house, which was under the invocation of St. John the Evangelist, was not founded until the year 1220, however the difference of time is not very great, being but nine years." We find it stated by Ware that the ruin, commonly called St. John's abbey, was founded by William Marshall earl of Pembroke, about the year 1211, it was named the 'Priory of St. John the Baptist,' and was inhabited by the regular canons of St. Augustine, of which the Arosian canons were a branch—the mayor and citizens of Kilkenny were grantees and assignees after its suppression. Campbell, in his tour, says, "St. John's abbey has great elegance and amazing lightness in the style of building; the abbey church of Bath is, I think, called 'the lantern of England,' but this is more windowed still, for of about fifty-four feet of the south side of the choir, yet entire, the whole seems to be one window. The east window is sixteen feet wide, and about forty feet high, as well as I can guess;

belonging to this abbey are the remains of several old monuments almost buried in the ruins." Again, in an anonymous tour through Ireland (the second edition of which was published in 1780, for the company of booksellers in Dublin), the tower of St. John's abbey is described as then standing, and is noticed for its lightness and beauty; "these ruins," says the tourist, "stand upon a large extent of ground, bordering on the river."

The portion of the building referred to by Campbell as the choir, was really the lady-chapel. The choir still exists, in ruins, and contains a very beautiful east window, but not that alluded to as being "forty feet high," which was the east window of the lady-chapel, and the beauty of which, before its demolition, may be judged by the accompanying lithographic view, copied from an Indian ink drawing made in the year 1813, for the late William Robertson, Esq., architect. Campbell's idea of the proportions of the window were much exaggerated, however, as Mr. Robertson, having measured it, has left a memorandum that its dimensions were really twenty-nine feet, by fifteen feet six inches. The drawing, which has been here lithographed, is particularly interesting and important as supplying the only trustworthy memorial which has been left of the appearance of the lady-chapel of the priory of St. John, before that portion of the ruins was metamorphosed into a modern church, when its great east window was reduced to less than half its original size, and many other changes were made in the building.

The erection of a place of worship in St. John's parish having been determined on, by act of vestry, in the year 1800, the late Mr. Robertson was selected as the architect, and invited to send in plans. It is probable that on that occasion he made the ground-plan of the then existing ruins, of which a reduced lithograph appears on the opposite page; and he also caused drawings to be made of all the most interesting architectural details of the priory. That Mr. Robertson, in forming his design for a new church, was very anxious to preserve the entire of the ruins and sepulchral monuments, appears by the first plan which he prepared, which is still in existence, and in my custody; for he proposed to fit up the old choir (C on the ground plan) as a parish church, to provide a groined entrance porch (A on plan), and to cover in the lady-chapel (B on plan) with the intention of having it form a receptacle for the ancient tombs and other relics of ornamental sculpture, then lying about the ruins. This plan, however, was unfortunately rejected, probably on account of the slight additional expense which it would involve; the rebuilding and roofing of the lady-chapel alone was determined upon by the parochial authorities, and Mr. Robertson's views having been frustrated, he is not to be held accountable for the present rather incongruous arrangement, and the sad havoc made amongst the ancient tombs.

In the course of the works Mr. Robertson took particular notice of every thing of interest which occurred, and carefully jotted down notes



PLAN OF THE RUINS OF THE PRIORY OF ST JOHN, A.D. 1813
Restored by T. G. Robertson from a drawing by the late W. Robertson, Esq. Architect

of what appeared to him worthy of observation, together with the result of his inquiries from old inhabitants as to features of the structure which had been removed previous to his time. The following are the memoranda which he has left on the subject :—

“Of the tower of St. John’s I have been unable to procure any trace or description but the above [that given in the anonymous tour] ; by Mr. Laffan and Mr. McCreery it is said to have been a plain square tower without ornament, and at the time of its destruction they were of sufficient age to recollect it ; this tower was pulled down by Mr. Colles, when building the infantry barracks ; it had been undermined, and fell on a Sunday morning, most fortunately, in the absence of the workmen.

“This may serve as another instance, how we ought to preserve these valuable fragments whilst in our power ; another year or two, and probably those we now possess may no longer exist ; if we argue from the towers of St. Francis and Black Abbeys, which remain to us, and were confessedly structures of less magnitude and beauty than St. John’s, we have reason to regret the insensibility and carelessness of our ancestors.

“In taking down the ruin [of the lady-chapel] of St. John’s, for the purpose of building a church, many things presented themselves worthy of observation—interspersed amongst the mouldings were several pieces of grit, of rather a perishable nature when compared with the lime-stone ; we are at present ignorant where the grit quarries are situate. It is singular that there were found in taking down the whole front but five or six dowells, and those were in the piers, and in a most extraordinary state of good preservation ; in the mullions of the windows there was not one, and although the whole front was inclined above fourteen inches out of the perpendicular, and the entire height did not exceed twenty feet, yet not one of the mullions had fallen.

“The builders seemed to have given themselves much extra labour, as the piers and arches consisted of many *small* stones, for which there existed no necessity, as our present quarries were known to them (as the stone used proves), and are probably some of the finest in Ireland—stones of any desirable length being found in them ; the increased number of beds in the masonry was therefore not only lost labour, but rendered the work less enduring.

“The sculptures appeared to have been badly executed from beautiful ideas ; the various characters, the different airs of the heads, many of them satyr-like, the elegant and graceful intermixture of vegetable productions with human heads, &c., well bespeak the taste and superior genius of the artist who constructed them. To derogate from his well-deserved character by saying that they were but copies of others previously executed in England, would be but pitiful and ungenerous criticism ; a cultivated taste and mind being as fully displayed in the *selection* of beautiful subjects, as in their *creation*.

“Amongst the rubbish were found many fragments of several varieties

of flooring tiles, about three quarters of an inch thick and glazed upon the upper surface; the patterns were well designed and prettily arranged, and most probably formed part of a tessellated pavement; the place in which they were found was apparently a door-way, and so low in the ground that there is every probability of their being ancient. A tomb in a perfect state was found four feet under the surface, and in what was probably the original surface; close to it, but on a lower level, were found a number of sepulchral cells, separated from each other by a thin partition of masonry; in these probably were buried the lay brothers of the establishment, as the cells were filled with earth. At St. Canice's and Knocktopher similar cells were found.

"A copper coin of Charles II. was found in the end wall, which was modern, and in the rubbish was discovered a variety of leaden medal, in which an iron wire was inserted and had corroded the lead: on one side were two heads, on the reverse, 'SEXTUS IV. PAPA;' it was probably an indulgence."*

In conclusion, I may remark that these drawings and notes were made by the late Mr. Robertson for the purpose of illustrating a local topographical work that some forty years ago he had intended to publish, with which design in view he employed artists, at very considerable expense, to take sketches of every building of historic or antiquarian interest then existing in the County of Kilkenny. His numerous professional engagements ultimately prevented him from carrying out this intention, but the drawings which he has left behind are most valuable, as serving to preserve the features of many interesting buildings which have since been destroyed; and as a friend and pupil of his, I feel much pleasure in enabling the Society to illustrate the interesting ruins of St. John's priory by the accompanying view and ground-plan, tending as they do to display proofs of that gentleman's taste and disinterested love of art.

ANCIENT CIVIC ENACTMENTS FOR RESTRAINING GOS- SIPPING AND FEASTING.

BY JOHN G. A. PRIM.

[Read at the Meeting of January 8th.]

At the risk of exposing the local civic dignitaries of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to the imputation of a serious want of gallantry and consideration for the foibles and amiable weaknesses of the softer sex, I am induced to extract some by-laws from the records of

* More probably a *bull*a which had been attached to an indulgence.

CORRIGENDA.

- p. 290, line 32, for "See Fionn," read "See Finn," and for "*Suidhe Fionn*," read "*Suidhe Finn*".
- p. 291, line 17, after "wide," dele " , ".
- p. 292, line 18, for "covering stone," read "covering-stone".
- Ib. line 41, after "Gaul," insert " , ".
- p. 293, line 4, for "Suidhe Fionn," read "Suidhe Finn," and for "*Suidhe Fionn*," read "*Suidhe Finn*".
- p. 322, line 3, from bottom, for "Argatros," read "Argetros".
- p. 323, line 9, for "Acadamy," read "Academy".
- p. 324, line 3, for "Fratertach," read "Flahertach".
- p. 387, line 14, for "centre," read "cavern".
- p. 400, line 28, after "what" insert "we".
- Ib. line 40, after "survey," insert " , ".
- p. 407, line 38, *note*, after "custody," dele ") ".
- p. 410, line 4, from bottom, *note*, for "ΤΗΟΚΡΑΤΗ," read "ΤΗΟΚΡΑΤΗ".
- p. 412, line 25, for "sight," read "site".
- p. 413, line 3, for "HORE," read "HOARE".
- p. 433, line 28, for "for," read "but".
- p. 442, line 2, for "RSQ.," read "ESQ".
- p. 446, line 15, after "lordship," dele " , ".
- p. 483, line 13, for "earls of Saxon," read "Saxon earls".
- p. 492, line 3, from bottom, after "*Kilkenny*," insert ") ".